

# Michigan Areas of Concern

## Project Highlight: St. Marys River



### Little Rapids Habitat Restoration

**Project Type:** Restoration



**Location:** Chippewa County

### Project at a Glance

Since the mid-1800s, the St. Marys River has undergone extensive man-made alterations for the purposes of navigation, travel and hydroelectric power. These changes destroyed habitat at the East and West Neebish Rapids, the Little Rapids, and left only remnants of the Main Rapids. Today, the Main Rapids receives less than 10 percent of its historical flow and represents the only remaining rapids habitat of this globally unique river, however, the Little Rapids is a candidate for restoration.

The construction of the causeway, from the ferry dock on Island No. 1 to Sugar Island, destroyed the Little Rapids by diverting flow away from the shallows. Where waters once flowed freely, they now are restricted by two submerged six-foot culverts. These culverts are a safety hazard and result in poor habitat for fish and wildlife due to the restricted flow. With restored flow, however, the area has potential to once again provide foraging, spawning and nursery habitat for a wide variety of sport fish and other aquatic organisms.



Restoration of the Little Rapids would involve reconnecting the upper and lower sections of the river between Island No. 1 and Sugar Island. The project would replace the existing culverts with a series of large box culverts, creating an opening approximately 600 feet wide that will improve water flow.

The Little Rapids restoration would be key to addressing fish and wildlife impairments and would represent an important step in delisting the river as an Area of Concern, in addition to providing local safety, fishing, access and economic benefits.



Project designers believe that opening the causeway would improve flow to this part of the Little Rapids southeast of the causeway, encouraging a variety of game species to return and use the habitat year round.

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Restored flow to the shaded area would return the Little Rapids to a more natural state. This would improve habitat for fish and wildlife, in turn creating recreational opportunities.

### Project Benefits

- Supports the region's tourism economy
- Improves ~70 acres of habitat
- Increases fishing access
- Improves safety (culvert removal)
- Allows fish passage
- Moves area toward AOC delisting



The project would restore some flow, but not enough to recreate the whitewater rapids seen in this photo from the early 1900s.

### Economic Benefits

The St. Marys River is a major source of economic opportunity for the region. Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan and Ontario all have strong tourism-based economies centered on sport fishing and other recreational activities and attracting anglers from across the United States, Canada and beyond.

In the mid-1980s, economists estimated the St. Marys River fishery generates \$25 million in Michigan and \$15-20 million annually in Ontario. One recent study showed that habitat restoration work at a West Michigan AOC provided a six-to-one return on the initial investment.



Artist's rendering of the Little Rapids with proposed bridge structure and improved flows.

### Contact:

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### Project webpage:

[www.eup-planning.org/current-projects/little-rapids-noaa-project](http://www.eup-planning.org/current-projects/little-rapids-noaa-project)